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ABSTRACT

This brief overview of research on Hispanic parents' cooperation in supporting their children's education focuses on the need to support parents so that they can, in turn, participate in their children's education. It suggests that local Hispanic community agencies have an important role in bringing schools and parents together. The following topics are covered: (1) barriers to parental involvement; (2) Hispanic parents' interest; (3) action from schools; (4) barriers to school action; and (5) community involvement with parents and schools. Included is an 11-item reference list and a list of other ASPIRA publications. (MYM)

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ASPIRA Institute for Policy Research

RESEARCH NOTES

Number 1, 1990

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HISPANIC COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS: PARTNERS IN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parental involvement is a popular issue these days. Most programs funded by the Department of Education now require a parental involvement component. Numerous studies over the past two decades have found parents' participation to be positively correlated with student achievement. Yet involvement of parents, especially low-income parents, remains an underused technique (Epstein). And involvement of low-income Hispanic parents is even lower. Many studies have examined the role of schools in increasing contact with parents. Most recommendations focus on hiring bilingual staff liaisons. Yet schools find Hispanic parents "hard to reach," and for many Hispanic parents, local community agencies are more accessible to them than the schools. Since research has shown the need for schools and the community to work together, what role can Hispanic community agencies play in developing Hispanic parents' involvement in their children's schooling?

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Empirical studies over the past twenty years have shown a strong relationship between parental involvement and their children's success in school. Henderson (1988) published a bibliography of 27 studies that show the effectiveness of parental involvement for school success. Yet parental involvement is an underused technique. Epstein (1986), in a survey of 1,269 Maryland elementary school parents, found that 58% of them rarely or never received requests from the teacher to become involved in learning activities at home.

Parent-teacher contact is especially poor in low-income communities. In a related survey of 3,700 Maryland teachers Epstein and Becker (1987) found that teachers who did not already actively involve parents (a majority, according to the parents) were more likely to accept family background as the *primary* determinant of parental participation. This finding is consistent with the results of a study by So (1986-7). Using High School and Beyond data, he compared "barrio schools" (those with over 50% Hispanic students) and "white schools" (those with over 98% White students), and found that 31% of barrio school administrators reported a "serious parent lack of interest" in school functions, compared to 7% of the administrators in white schools.

Hispanic Parents' Interest

Is it true that low-income Hispanic parents are less interested in their children's school success than middle-class White parents? In another analysis of High School and Beyond data, So (1987) found that Hispanic parents have high aspirations for their children and want their children to receive an education above the high school level. In fact, more Hispanic parents than White parents reported wanting their children to finish college. Fernández, et al. (1989), surveyed over 700 urban Hispanic ninth grade students for the ASPIRA Five Cities High School Dropout Study. He found that the students believe that their parents encourage them to learn English, get good grades, finish high school, and get good jobs.

Action from Schools

Studies which examine raising parental involvement levels usually focus on what the school can do to improve contact. Epstein (1986), discussing the implications of her research for limited-English proficient parents, calls on *schools* to make the appropriate connections with these parents. This includes bilingual publications and notices, bilingual aides, phone calls to parents in the native language, native-language decision-making

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bodies, and understanding of the families' culture, strengths, and goals. Likewise, Hoover-Dempsey, et al. (1987) examined the relationship of eight *school-based* variables to five measures of parental involvement to determine which school practices most correlated with increased parental involvement. She found that the two factors most significantly related to involvement levels were the socioeconomic status of school families and teacher efficacy–teachers' beliefs in their ability to teach and their pupils' ability to learn. From this finding Hoover-Dempsey presents possibilities for changes in school and teacher practices to increase levels of parental involvement.

Barriers to School Action

Yet calls to action from schools such as these ignore the real situation of inner-city, barrio schools. So (1986-7) found that barrio schools are characterized by teachers who are majority White (52%, compared to 80% Hispanics among their students), and less well-educated than their peers in white schools. There is a greater problem with teacher absenteeism and teacher lack of commitment than in white schools. Teacher efficacy (believing they can teach and the students can learn) seems seriously impaired in these schools. Further, there is the already-mentioned statistic that almost one-third of the barrio school administrators perceive their students' parents to be seriously uninterested. Given his previous finding that Hispanic parents actually have high aspirations and expectations for their children, So interprets this perceived lack of interest as indicative of a break in community/school relations.

Cummins (1986) presents an important theoretical framework for understanding how this break contributes to the lack of success of school-based reform movements to help minority students. He sees that students from "dominated" societal groups are disabled by their relationships with educators from the dominant group. That is, minority students, through daily contact with schools that view their culture as inferior and needy, are disempowered and made more likely to fail. Further, this relationship between schools and the minority communities has stayed virtually the same throughout all the reform efforts. He states (p. 26):

> Students from dominated communities will be empowered in the school context to the extent that the communities themselves are empowered through their interactions with the school. When educators involve minority parents as partners in their children's education, parents appear to develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to children, with positive academic consequences . . . Dramatic changes in children's academic progress can be realized when educators take the initiative to change [the] exclusionary pattern to one of collaboration.

He notes, however, "Given the societal commitment to maintaining the dominant/dominated power relationships, we can predict that educational changes threatening this structure will be fiercely resisted" (p. 33).

If barrio schools, then, are unlikely advocates of the very changes needed to empower Hispanic students and parents and bring them into closer relationship with the schools, what other institutions may play a role?

Community Involvement with Parents and Schools

In a recent needs assessment of Hispanic communities in the northeastern U.S. conducted by ASPIRA, Petrovich (1987) surveyed 250 Hispanic leaders and determined that their priority need was to "increase Hispanic school attendance and reduce dropout rates" (consistent with So's research). In an antecedent in-depth conference with forty of these Hispanic leaders, the role of Hispanic community-based organizations as advocates for Hispanic youth was raised repeatedly. Participants stated that community-based organizations are able to hold the education system responsible when schools are not effectively serving Hispanics. They noted that organizations in the Hispanic community had already created alternative education services because of the absence of such services in mainstream organizations.

There is a sense among Hispanic leaders, then, that Hispanic community-based organizations can deliver some educational services that So's research implies barrio schools are unable to provide. Further, by using Hispanic staff, they may avoid the disempowerment Cummins sees as a result of the dominant-dominated relationship of majority schools in minority communities.

ASPIRA's Work with Parents

Empirical evidence to support the idea that community-based organizations can assist schools in reaching parents is small, and more systematic studies need to be undertaken. Experiential evidence from ASPIRA's thirty years of work as a parent-founded and supported organization, however, indicates the empowering role community organizations can play in this process.

ASPIRA's newest model for parental involvement is the Hispanic Community Mobilization for Dropout Prevention (HCMDP) project, which assists Hispanic parents to improve their children's chances of educational success. The HCMDP, a two-year old demonstration project funded by the Department of Education, has reached over 5,000 parents in ten cities with information and support in participating in their children's education. We have found Latino parents to be very concerned about their children's school success and desiring to develop skills to help the children achieve their goals. The HCMDP is helping parents acquire the parenting and leadership skills necessary to actively participate with their children's schools.

One of the program's Latino parents recently commented, "It is very important to have parent participation. It is most important in our culture because sometimes children find obstacles in finding their identity . . . We need to get parents ready for when their child faces this problem. One of the most important things I do is to tell children 'you don't have to be someone else' . . . Sometimes I start my day at 8:00 in the morning, and finish at 10:00 at night. But I'm very excited. In my school, we've made a lot of change."

--Elizabeth Weiser Ramírez
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Other Resources on Parents from ASPIRA

ASPIRA Five Cities High School Dropout Study: Focus on Parents
12 page summary of findings and policy implications about the parents of students participating in a two-year research study . $2 prepaid.

Making the Most of Your Child's Education: A Guide for Parents
64 page parent involvement guides for low-literacy Hispanic parents focusing on parent-child relations, homework, and school participation rights. $5 prepaid. Bulk rates available. Specify English or Spanish. Please note: single copies are sold through the National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1-800-638-9675. Bulk copies only sold through ASPIRA.

Volume Two of the Guide for Parents will be released in the fall. This guide will assist parents to work with the schools and to form parent groups. Copies will be sold after August. Write to ASPIRA if you would like to be notified of its release.

Other Publications from the ASPIRA National Office

Facing the Facts: Hispanic Dropouts in Ten Urban Communities
16 pages of graphs and statistics on the status of ten Hispanic communities in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Texas, and Wisconsin. $4 prepaid.

ASPIRA Five Cities High School Dropout Study: Characteristics of Hispanic High School Students
Two-year research study on the effects of different characteristics on Hispanic students' decisions to drop out or stay in school. 170 pages. $20 prepaid.

Who Stays? Who Leaves? Findings from the ASPIRA Five Cities High School Dropout Study
Working Paper summarizing findings of the study , 28 pages. $3 prepaid.

Northeast Hispanic Needs: A Guide for Action
Needs analysis, policy recommendations for Hispanic communities in seven states, 1988. $20 prepaid.

El Legado
Film on the history of Puerto Rican migration to the mainland U.S., in English or Spanish. Reel to reel: $500, VHS: $250, rental $75/day .

ASPIRA News
Quarterly newsletter of the ASPIRA Association. Subscriptions: $10 per year .

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